

*Examining “Fact-Checking” Reporting on War Events From a Witnessing Perspective:
Using the Bucha Event as an Example*

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In the digital age, verifying the authenticity of war news on social media is challenging due to anonymity, lack of professionalism, and subjectivity in user-generated content. Esteemed media outlets like BBC and CNN respond with fact-checking reports, using scientific methods to ensure content authenticity and provide 'objective' explanations. This study examines BBC Chinese's 'Reality Check' reports on the Bucha event from a witnessing viewpoint, employing multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). The findings highlight four key points: fact-checking news as a distinct reporting form, the advantage of machine witnessing, CSI-like news presentation methods, and the active engagement of online readers as witnesses. However, it's crucial to note that BBC's use of fact-checking conceals subjective choices and viewpoints on war events, potentially masking underlying Western hegemony.

Keywords: Fact-Checking, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, Witnessing

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Introduction

In the past, war reporting involved journalists collecting eyewitness accounts, with some even ventured into conflict zones to provide first-hand reporting. With the advent of satellites, television news adopted live broadcasting, allowing reporters to deliver real-time updates from the field. However, contemporary war coverage is not solely produced by journalists. Citizens, including both civilians and military personnel, can use smartphones to capture various encounters in conflict zones and upload videos to platforms such as YouTube (Sumiala, 2019). Consequently, news media now relies on user-generated content (UGC), public witnessing and shared reporting to supplement coverage of current conflicts.

In citizen-witnessed reports, individuals play multiple roles: they are not only witnesses at the scene, but also recorders of evidence and distributors of footage. Their testimonies may lack structure, and their footage may be shaky and unfocused, yet they serve as “flesh witnessing,” undertaken at the risk of their lives (Chouliaraki & Al-Ghazzi, 2022). Their presence becomes a potent form of support, but due to diverse perspectives, testimonies on social media platforms often become conflated and conflicting (Koliska & Roberts, 2015).

Moreover, the anonymity afforded by social platforms enables individuals with malicious intent to masquerade as citizens and partake in various forms of “dark participation” (Quandt, 2018). For instance, Russia frequently employs troll factories to disseminate misinformation or propaganda extensively, manipulate online forums, or fabricate information (Kiriya, 2021; Magallón-Rosa et al., 2023). While social platforms facilitate the amplification of diverse voices, they also contribute to the fragmentation and ambiguity of truth.

Facing the challenge of distinguishing between true and false information in war reporting, renowned international news media such as BBC and CNN attempt to curb the spread of misinformation, errors, and misleading messages through fact-checking reports (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). These reports have been widely reproduced and disseminated by global media, portals, and third-party fact-checking mechanisms, and Taiwan is no exception. This study takes BBC Chinese's “Reality Check” reports as an example, aiming to examine how BBC, as an international media, presents authenticity through fact-checking from a witnessing perspective, and continually strengthens its hegemonic position in “truth-telling.”

Bucha was originally a small town on the outskirts of Kyiv, Ukraine, but overnight, on April 2, 2022, it became a global media event under intense scrutiny. On that day, three Agence France-Presse (AFP) journalists entered the town to investigate rumors circulating on social media about widespread corpses in Bucha. Seizing the opportunity as Russian forces withdrew, they documented various atrocities through images, including burnt tanks, bundled corpses, and piles of mass graves, revealing the horrors of war. These images quickly became headlines in media outlets worldwide, prompting other journalists to flock to Bucha in an attempt to uncover more stories of suffering.

News media and social platforms continue to disseminate various reports and information about horrific deaths. “Bucha” is no longer just a local town; it has transformed into a human hell, labeled as a “massacre” and “genocide” by Western media. This has sparked international condemnation against Russia, leading governments worldwide to take various actions, including recalling Russian ambassadors and imposing sanctions. Concurrently, Russia has employed social media to spread messages such as “fake deaths” and “living corpses,” vehemently asserting that these are fabricated images, part of “another staged

performance by the Kyiv regime for the Western media” (Reuters, 20220403). The move was aimed at refuting accusations from Western media.

With the world watching, “Bucha” finds itself in a labyrinth where both sides hold onto their own versions of the truth. As information becomes increasingly confusing, international media outlets turn to fact-checking reporting. Their goal is to use scientific forensic methods to review the veracity and uncertainty of content and provide explanations that are deemed “objective” and “reasonable.”

Reports by international media fact-checking teams have become widely relied upon tools for debunking rumors. However, how do these seemingly accurate and reliable news sources reflect their “authenticity?” How do they use witnessing technology to consolidate their hegemonic position in an era of “witnessing fever,” especially in the battleground where the ubiquity of eyewitness images poses a threat? What news strategies do international media employ to enhance the authority of their news reports? To address these questions, this study takes BBC Chinese’s “Reality Check” reports on Bucha as a case study, aiming to explore the impact of witnessing technology on war reporting.

Journalistic Witnessing and War Reporting

The concept of “witnessing” was originally utilized in the realms of law and theology. However, following the investigation into the Holocaust atrocities post-World War II, it found widespread application in diverse fields such as psychology, literature, and media studies. Nevertheless, “witnessing” is a complex communicative practice, and the concept itself carries multiple semantic layers. As Peters (2001, p. 709) highlighted: “The witness (person) of the witness (speech act) is witnessed (by the audience).” This implies that “witness” can denote the testifier, the act of testifying, the testimony (statement/text), or even the audience witnessing the testimony.

Furthermore, the focus of research on witnessing varies across fields. In journalism studies, witnessing is a critical means to maintain journalistic professionalism. It involves obtaining facts and reflecting the truth through the “first-hand experience” of witnesses. Given journalism’s emphasis on “objectivity,” the construction of reality requires verification, and “seeing is believing” serves as a guarantee of news credibility. Therefore, in the field of journalism, the terms “eyewitness” and “eyewitnessing” are often used (Allan, 2013; Mortensen, 2011; Zelizer, 2007).

Tait (2011) pointed out that previous research on media witnessing or journalistic witnessing often conflated witnessing and bearing witness, but the two are actually different. Witnessing occurs when the witness happens to be at the scene (passively) and sees (seeing); bearing witness involves actively speaking out about what was seen (saying). It entails translating sensory experiences into discourse (Peters, 2001; Tait, 2011). The former adheres to the legal requirement of “being present” and seeing “objective facts” with one’s own eyes, while the latter carries religious implications, striving to convey and reconstruct the facts to others (Pantti, 2019, p. 9). From this perspective, journalistic witnessing encompasses the translation of eyewitnesses’ ocular experiences, particularly instances of suffering, into news texts. These texts are subsequently presented to audiences for (re)witnessing, cultivating moral awareness and a sense of responsibility. Throughout this process, the media functions as a witnessing institution, shaping audiences into (secondary) witnesses (Chouliaraki, 2006; Ellis, 2000).

Journalistic witnessing has long been closely linked with advancements in witnessing technology. The media's role as a witness has been strengthened by the evolution of witnessing technology, rendering news texts serving as testimonies more genuine and trustworthy. Despite the hurdles posed by the widespread adoption of digital technologies, news media persist in their efforts to solidify their authoritative position through the utilization of witnessing technology and the introduction of novel forms of witnessing reporting.

News Industry and Fact-Checking

In the post-truth era, fact-checking is increasingly valued. Not only private non-profit organizations have established fact-checking mechanisms, but many news media have also begun to take advantage of professional editing and setting up fact-checking departments. For example, in 2015, the BBC established Reality Check (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). Additionally, various digital fact-checking technologies have been developed, such as geolocation and satellite imaging (Chouliaraki & Al-Ghazzi, 2022).

Fact-checking is widely regarded as an extension of professional journalism. While journalists are typically tasked with actively conducting interviews and verifying the accuracy of content prior to publication, fact-checkers adopt a more passive approach, responding to already published information to uncover the extent of its inaccuracies (Singer, 2021). Presently, Western media have employed verification and witnessing technologies to ascertain the authenticity of content.

Nevertheless, within the framework of objectivity and impartiality, fact-checking, while serving as a method to combat digital manipulation and prevent the spread of misinformation (Cover, Haw, & Thompson, 2023; Singer, 2023), entails inherent choices and framing. It prompts questions regarding the criteria for selecting information for fact-checking, the methods used to evaluate truth, and the delineation of the boundary between truth and falsehood (Farlas & Schou, 2018; Uscinski & Butler, 2013). These considerations are intertwined with issues of values and ideologies, extending beyond the technical aspects of fact-checking.

Method

In today's era of rampant misinformation, “fact-checking” reporting has evolved into a new form of journalistic genre. Bearing the name “fact-checking,” this type of reporting presents and verifies various pieces of evidence. Not only does it assist audiences in discerning the authenticity of news, but it also serves to bolster the credibility of media reporting. This genre is now widely utilized by international media outlets such as CNN, BBC, Deutsche Welle, and others.

This study utilizes the fact-checking report on the Bucha incident from the BBC Chinese website as a case study. Its reporting is notably comprehensive, integrating various witnessing technologies and referencing joint investigation findings from other reputable media sources, thus presenting the factual consistency in an intertextual format. Consequently, it serves as an illustrative example of the witnessing technologies and journalistic strategies employed in comparable fact-checking reports during times of armed conflict.

Since the fact-check reports on the BBC Chinese website employ a variety of semiotic features such as text, images, videos, and hyperlinks, this study adopts multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). MCDA emphasizes that meaning is jointly constructed through multiple semiotic resources and communication modes. Therefore, textual analysis should consider how all symbols, genres, codes, etc., are selected and reconstructed (Ledin & Machin, 2018; 2019), contributing to the “naturalization” of particular values, beliefs, and power relations (Breazu, 2022; Catalano and Gatti, 2017). This approach will enable us to explain how witnessing technologies and techniques influence fact-checking reports and the values and ideologies they convey.

Analysis

The BBC Chinese website's fact-checking report on the Bucha incident primarily focuses on scrutinizing the assertion of “staging” made by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. The headline of this report, highlighted in bold, reads, “BBC Fact-Check: Satellite Images Reveal More Details of a Large Number of Bodies in Bucha Town,” (<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/world-60994954>) explicitly indicating its genre as a “fact-checking” report. Immediately following, the official website design showcases a thematic photo--a satellite image--with bodies on the streets marked by red squares. This aligns with the headline, signifying that readers will encounter visuals provided by witnessing technologies, such as satellite positioning images, photos, video screenshots, etc. These visuals are complemented by textual explanations, expert opinions, and fact-checking evidence from other international media to debunk Russia's three claims. The fact-checking report on this incident employed four main techniques:

1. Employing Defense Attorney Rebuttal Strategies

Fact-checking news has become a new genre of reporting. While traditional journalism often presents the perspectives of both parties in controversial events, fact-checking news directly challenges problematic information, akin to the role of a defense attorney in a courtroom.

In response to Russia's three claims, including the fabrication of corpses, the lack of stiffness in corpses, and the absence of violence against residents, the report employs scientific forensic methods to present a rebuttal. This involves cross-referencing the positions of bodies using satellite positioning images, street photos, and videos. Additionally, forensic experts and pathologists are consulted to provide professional explanations for the concept of “dead but not stiff.” The report also incorporates firsthand accounts from residents. The combination of all these elements helps debunk Russia's claims and allows the audience to become witnesses, witnessing how the falsehoods are exposed. This innovative reporting approach underscores its commitment to scientific rigor and evidence-based practices.

2. Machine Witnessing Versus Flesh Witnessing

The fact-checking report relies on various visual technologies for witnessing, such as satellite imagery and photographs. These are considered “unbiased” and “unmediated” testimony, more reliable than flesh witnessing because they are less prone to errors or falsehoods. Satellite images, in particular, capture and record everything from above, providing a surveillance-backed account. Serving as testimony, satellite images capture details in specific time and space, overcoming the subjectivity, emotion, or fallibility of human senses. Through satellite witnessing, its mechanical nature and aerial position (above human life) make its

image testimony more impeccable, echoing the title “Satellite Images Reveal More Details.” This also implies that (Russian) lies can be easily exposed.

Visual technologies, while capable of recording and storing unexpected moments across multiple temporal and spatial dimensions, do not speak for themselves. Additionally, with advancements in digital image processing techniques, there are instances where machine testimony may be clouded by concerns of fabrication. Nevertheless, fact-checking has developed various tools, such as frame-by-frame image comparison, freezing frames, zooming, or reversing, to detect whether images are manipulated or misinterpreted. In its reporting, the BBC conducted a detailed frame-by-frame analysis of the videos presented by the Russian side, accompanied by a comparison with high-resolution photos provided by AFP, to refute Russia's claim of “walking dead.” This implies that machines, despite continuously replaying recorded content, may be assigned different meanings by various users, including the media, when interpreting the same video.

3. A News Report With a CSI Style

The fact-checking report adopts evidence-gathering and investigative techniques similar to CSI programs, such as scientific reasoning or visually reconstructing events, ultimately bringing the details of the case to light. In the report, the BBC simultaneously asserts in writing, “...claims about the Bucha incident lacking any basis, we have verified this through evidence,” and utilizes machine testimony to attempt the reconstruction of the moment when the incident occurred. As mentioned previously or As mentioned earlier, the possibility of misusing visual evidence exists; therefore, a cautious scientific approach is required to meticulously reconstruct the crime scene. This involves cross-referencing the time and location of vehicles and bodies on the street, using color markers like yellow or red to highlight, thereby debunking the falsity of Russian testimony.

In this report, most of the text descriptions are neutral, such as “We have seen similar effects in videos posted on other websites,” “It is unclear why Russia raised this point,” “It may not be evident from the pictures alone,” and “There are contradictions with the accounts of eyewitnesses.” These efforts aim to evoke a sense of scientific fact-checking. The fact-checking report integrates visual images, expert explanations, firsthand accounts from witnesses, and verification results from other media. It enables the audience to witness the falsehood of the Russian testimony from a scientific perspective, reminiscent of a courtroom proceeding. Audiences, who adhere to the principles of justice, also form their own moral judgments while witnessing the event.

4. Active Witnessing by Users

As a digital news platform, BBC Chinese highlights a form of witnessing that diverges from traditional passive reception. It emphasizes that the audience must actively engage, relying on manual interactions and visual perception to genuinely witness the news content. On the official website, viewers are required to actively participate manually by sliding their fingers to view the content, clicking on relevant links, or watching eyewitness video reports on YouTube. This active involvement enables a more comprehensive understanding of controversial issues.

Due to the global connectivity of social media platforms, BBC's coverage extends beyond its official website and is widely shared and forwarded by Taiwanese online media, third-party

fact-checking centers, and users. Furthermore, individuals can experience this emphasis on hands-on collaboration in news witnessing without the need to subscribe to BBC. They can effortlessly leverage search engines or participate in content sharing to personally encounter this form of news witnessing, emphasizing the synergy between manual and visual engagement.

Ibrahim (2021) points out that digital platforms have deeply integrated into our daily lives, allowing audiences to freely upload and share their observations, thereby altering our ability to witness trauma and testify. This, in turn, reshapes audiences into virtual witnesses. When confronted with various complex and chaotic content on the internet, audiences may not know what they are witnessing. Fact-checking efforts aim to guide audiences into becoming witnesses capable of discerning the truth, emphasizing the synergy between manual and visual participation.

Conclusion

BBC utilizes witnessing technologies, forensic scientific methods, and social media platforms to present fact-checking news in a more authoritative and trustworthy reporting genre. Nevertheless, behind the facade of seemingly objective testimonies, there is a series of events, choices of sources, and interpretative frameworks at play. Taking the case of “Bucha” as an illustration, selecting it as the subject of fact-checking, with primary testimonies sourced from Western media and the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, further reinforces the Western stance of justice against Russia from humanitarian and scientific perspectives. In reality, BBC's fact-checking reports provide audiences with a specific witnessing perspective, encouraging them to interpret the Bucha incident from a Western viewpoint.

As Ashuri & Pinchevski (2009) argue, witnessing should be seen as a specific field of power and knowledge competition, where all participants have their own interests, goals, and positions. Therefore, witnessing analysis becomes a political struggle. When receiving fact-checking reports, one should not naively assume that they represent the entire truth; their perspectives are often partial and limited. Hence, audiences should maintain critical thinking when consuming such news, particularly being vigilant about potential biases in information selection and interpretation. In the binary framework of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, fact-checking reports are susceptible to becoming tools for ideological manipulation.

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